

Other People's History

Commemorating the Cultures of Yukon First Nations

What is the meaning of commemoration? What do we consider so valuable that we wish to pass on its meaning and even its substance to those following? What values do we wish to pass on? How do we do that? In this paper I would like to try and step outside the historian's paradigm and examine how communities consider commemoration. The issue of cultural continuity is what we are examining here. Cultures generally establish a variety of institutions to perpetuate themselves.

Among the Mennonites, my own cultural group, there is a wide range of ways of doing this. In the past, the primary elements have been place, stories and myths, church, close-knit communities and marriage rules, language and literature. More recently with the diaspora of the group a range of new methods has been added to both replace weakening old ways and to enhance the identity of the group to the larger polis. These include publications, international aid agencies, and museums; there is even a Mennonite National Historic Site in southern Manitoba. These do not entirely replace old ways but are attempts to ensure as many suitable ways as possible maintain these links through time. All these exist to ensure a continuity through time, to connect the present to the past and to provide guidance into the future. Each group will always have a full and dynamic catalogue of these methods in use.

These institutions can generally be broken into three, usually tightly integrated, groups:

- belief systems or religions to nurture and support values;
- teaching or education systems that pass on a set of living skills, reflecting these values.
- icons or stories that sustain and promote a sense of identity, based upon both the above values and sets of skills.

All these groups are firmly based in the commu-

nity, or are even family-centred activities. And they cover a very broad array of responses. I would like to focus on one feature of the third group, those ways communities or groups commemorate their identity and represent it for outsiders using government institutions. That is, how have or how can Yukon First Nations (Native Americans in USA usage) use national commemoration programs for their purposes. This commemoration of identity includes the protection of signifiers of value defining identity (internal use) and the presentation of these values to others (external use).

Why does a national government institution like Parks Canada get involved in such activities? How does it do it sensitively and helpfully?

WHY—The National Program

The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), established by the Government of Canada in 1919, exists at a national level to ensure the appropriate commemoration of those places, people and events that make up our national identity. Made up largely of historians and other cultural professionals representing each province and territory and the national cultural institutions, the Board considers public nominations for recognition. The Board advises the Minister of Canadian Heritage of its findings, who then makes a final decision on commemoration. Parks Canada, National Historic Sites Directorate, acts as both the research and support branches of

Carcross-Tagish First Nation "Indian Days." Community planned events like this are a celebration of identity and an important internal form for preserving and passing on cultural identity. Photo by D. Neufeld.



the Board. It is also the manager for the commemoration of those recommendations accepted by the Minister.

Any member of the public, or any government or non-government agency, can and do make nominations for the Board's consideration. The Board can also actively seek nominations to commemorate themes in Canadian history that deserve national attention. Over the last two decades, the Board has striven to balance the commemoration of "under-represented themes." Themes identified under these initiatives include women, ethnic minorities, selected basic industries and First Nations. Support for these initiatives has come from the Government of Canada through the commitment of both financial and staff resources. One supported initiative is the Board's expressed interest in receiving nominations from Yukon First Nations for sites of possible national historic significance.

HOW—the Experience in the Yukon

Parks Canada has developed a two-part program to carry out the Board's initiative in the Yukon. These parts are:

- the communication of the Board's purpose and interest to the Yukon First Nations,
- support for community initiatives in cultural commemoration.

The primary requirement from the perspective of Parks Canada is the provision of information on the Board and its work. This is particularly challenging in the dynamic cross-cultural environment stemming from the negotiation and finalization of the Yukon land claims settlement, essentially a land treaty between First Nations and the federal government. Many aspects of the relationship between Yukon First Nations and both the territorial and national governments are currently being defined—the Board is just another of many government voices trying to make itself heard by the 14 Yukon First Nations.

The cross-cultural character of defining commemoration has also complicated the comprehension of the Board's purpose and intent. In the Yukon, the record of national commemoration has focussed upon the achievements of newcomers, specifically the Klondike Gold Rush and subsequent economic and social development. The First Nations, not surprisingly, perceive the Board and Parks Canada as southern institutions without much immediate relevance to their own objectives. To this point they are not convinced of the usefulness or applicability of these institutions in their cultural continuity.

To address these difficulties, common to several other under-represented groups, Parks Canada sponsored a series of national workshops. These workshops included representatives of groups as

well as academics and professionals well-versed with their histories. In both the national and Yukon native history consultations the recommended course of action was clear—the initiation and direction for any commemoration must come from the communities. Academics, especially, were reluctant to take any responsibility for representing the values and identity of the First Nations. Parks Canada consequently, and I can add, reluctantly, shelved ideas for a thematic history, the usual survey of existing literature on any given topic to help focus commemoration. Instead a more diffuse community-based research approach was taken.

Parks Canada support for local initiatives in Yukon First Nation history has evolved from directed works on specific topics to the present community-based projects that explore locally directed objectives. Since 1987, Parks Canada has supported several major community-based native history projects in the Yukon. A brief description of three of these projects and their results provides an indication of the evolution of this program and an indication of the commemorative direction coming from Yukon First Nations.

Parks Canada began work on a research project with the Carcross-Tagish First Nation of the southern Yukon in 1987, as part of the commemoration of Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site. The presentation of the "Indian side of the story" appeared to offer another meaningful perspective on the gold rush passage of the thousands of stamperders travelling through this mountain pass on their way to the Klondike.

The First Nation resisted attempts to begin research work on such terms. From their perspective the gold rush was merely a big, occasionally obnoxious, but ultimately very short camping trip that bulldozed through their area. Rather than the "Indian side" of the whiteman's story, they wished to present their own story, and to serve their own needs. A community-based methodology gradually evolved as both First Nation and Parks Canada sought out common ground through the life of the project. Eventually, the research method and objectives were fit into the community structures—the project involved many community Elders, contributed to the creation of a community Elders' Council, and resulted in the publication of a First Nation account of their life in the region. The final work, built upon the new relationship between the National Historic Site and the First Nation, represents a consensus history of the community. It has become the basis for a variety of projects interpreting the community's history to outsiders. Discussions on the recognition and commemoration of this story in the existing National Historic Site continue.



Burnt Point on the Yukon River just below the abandoned community of Selwyn. Photo by Helene Dobrowsky/Midnight Arts.

Ivvavik National Park on the Yukon North Slope is the first national park in Canada created as a part of land claim agreement. The park is, in effect, a gift or a shared place from the Inuvialuit to all of the people of Canada. After some initial negotiations a five-year oral history project was initiated in 1988. A community-based partnership between the Inuvialuit and several government agencies, including Parks Canada, it included extensive interviews in Inuvialuktun with community Elders, both onsite and in their villages. Archival research and community donations created a major photo collection of the region. Transcripts were typed and translated and the project anthropologist prepared a list of major topics. These were reviewed by the Inuvialuit Elders who provided additional guidance to clarify their meaning and direction. Finally a summary report was prepared and again subjected to review. Here the community readily took control of the project and effectively applied resources to gather information of value to them. Already used in the schools, the collected information is also presently being analyzed as an expression of Inuvialuit Traditional Knowledge, the cultural equivalent of Euro-American Scientific Knowledge. This traditional knowledge is seen as an important element in the identification and application of appropriate management techniques in the region's co-management environment. This combined management regime will help ensure the recognition and protection of the Inuvialuit cultural values.

Finally, the cultural history of the Kluane National Park Reserve (NPR) has become a part of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation land claims final agreement. A management plan review of Kluane NPR in 1988 highlighted the need for a native history of the region. The Champagne and Aishihik First Nation, already well advanced into its land claims negotiations, was aggressively developing its own cultural research and resource

management capability. They demurred at the prospect of an outside agency working with their elders and having access to their history. The control of their history and its commemoration is an important issue to the community. The First Nation is aware of the need for cultural commemoration and the value of presentation to outsiders, but they wish to control this process.

Consequently, Parks Canada, also the federal agency for the fulfillment of aspects of the land claims agreement, negotiated a heritage sub-agreement supporting and describing common interests in regional First Nation commemoration. The First Nation has accepted responsibility for the commemoration of their own culture, including the potential use of Parks Canada as a vehicle for external presentation.

Although each of these three projects have divergent outcomes and operated in very different ways, there are some commonalities apparent from these examples. All three initiatives seek to commemorate Yukon First Nation history, for both internal and external audiences. Parks Canada has attempted to fulfill its mandate, but over the years there have been considerable clarification and rethinking of what that mandate actually is.

On the Chilkoot Trail, the initial focus was the preparation of an interesting, but directly linked aboriginal perspective to non-native history. Gradually, with considerable patience and indulgence by the First Nation community, there was a recognition of another history that needed telling. At present, the National Historic Site exists to represent the gold rush story. Nevertheless, there have been opportunities to work co-operatively with the Carcross-Tagish First Nation to include their history in commemorative programs. The research project was successful largely because it worked with existing community structures devoted to cultural continuity and supported them with new tools and approaches. The First Nation is currently considering whether it wishes to nominate its own history to the Board for possible national designation.

With the Inuvialuit the work has grown from a desire to simply identify and gather information on archaeological sites along the Arctic coast. The richness of the oral accounts provided a much deeper understanding of the Inuvialuit life on the coast and even challenged previous conclusions based solely upon archaeological evidence. Now Park staff and Inuvialuit Regional Corporation resource managers wrestle with the far more challenging question of incorporating the community's Traditional Knowledge, their ingrained values and ways of knowing, into the direct control and management of the resources needed to support the continuity of their culture.

In Kluane NPR, a desire to appropriately present First Nation culture to park visitors has morphed into an agreement to focus land claims settlement funds on enhancing the community's ability to research, preserve and define their own history.

Conclusion

Considering these experiences how close is Parks Canada coming to fulfilling its task for the HSMBC and the Minister of Canadian Heritage? Initial work plans focussed upon the traditional Parks Canada development of a general thematic history and then selecting suitable First Nations' sites for consideration based on this work. This strategy works on a presupposition of historical closure, or at least, the establishment of patterns of cultural expression recognizable by non-members. The Yukon First Nations rejected this approach and have responded by suggesting a more open-ended evaluation of their history. This allows them to initiate and control the commemorative agenda.

For Parks Canada, it means allowing the First Nations to set the speed of their acceptance of new commemorative methods and time to consider the implications of presentation to outside audiences. And the challenges of First Nation commemoration are unlikely to get any easier. Last spring Parks Canada supported the Tron dek Hwech'in First Nation in the organization of a Yukon River Heritage Symposium. The symposium was aimed at getting a number of Yukon FNs to consider a form of national commemoration to protect and present elements of their common riverine heritage. The Elders reflected upon the need for commemoration, stressing the importance

of protecting their way of life to preserve their values. At the end of two days there was an informal consensus. Rather than focusing upon any of their fish camps or hunting areas, or even the river itself, the group recommended the permanent protection of the clean water flowing through their lands. This direct connection between commemoration and cultural continuity is a lesson for us all.

What is the goal of the Board and Parks Canada in the commemoration of Yukon First Nation culture? Is it the appropriate presentation of Indian stories or placenames to curious punter? The preparation of yet another publication describing northern ways? Is a Yukon First Nation NHS the ultimate goal? None of these are goals, they are tools available to the community to achieve cultural continuity. To me they are good tools but there are many good tools around and the decision to use them is the First Nations', not Parks Canada's. The goal of the Board and the Dept. of Canadian Heritage is the maintenance and celebration, or commemoration, of identity. And that can only come from the community.

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